What kind of speech makes for peace?

Morwenna Ludlow

Department of Classics, Ancient History, Theology and Religion,
University of Exeter, UK
m.a.ludlow@exeter.ac.uk

David Newheiser

Department of Religion
Florida State University, USA
dnewheiser@fsu.edu

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Morwenna Ludlow

The issues I want to pursue in this conversation all relate to one key question[1]: What is the relationship between peace and human discourse? This prompts one to think about the possibilities of establishing peace through words. What kind of speech makes for peace in a profound sense as opposed to speech which simply calms emotions and establishes a superficial cessation of hostility? What is the *quality* of the speech which is effective for peace? Is the kind of speech that makes for true, lasting peace, itself notably peaceful? Is it, for example (to use some adjectives from the Christian tradition) humble and gentle? Or is the speech that makes for peace more jagged and uncomfortable? Related to these questions is the concept of civility. Is civility a necessary *condition* for the kind of exchange of words that makes for peace? Or can civility only be one of the *ends* of peace? And what do we mean by civility anyway? Is there a kind of supposed civility of discourse which creates a superficial peace by, for example, restricting some awkward voices or some difficult topics, while preventing a deeper peace which is able to take such voices and subjects into account? Those are a lot of questions, so let me start my part of the conversation with two more concrete historical examples.

In 411 Augustine of Hippo preached two sermons on peace in the city of Carthage in the Roman Province of North Africa.[2] In the coming days Bishops from two parts of a fractured church were due to meet to talk and, Augustine hoped, to establish a lasting peace for the

[1] This piece was written while the author was a visiting researcher at the Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz. She is enormously grateful to her host Prof. Dr. Ulrich Volp and his colleagues for their hospitality and for the invitation to write this piece.
[2] Sermons 357 In Praise of Peace and 358 On Peace and Charity in AUGUSTINE, Sermons (341–400) on Various Subjects, ed. JOHN E. ROTELLE, trans. EDMUND HILL (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995) On-Line Edition: Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: InteLex Corporation, 2014.

church. Augustine himself had become the leading theologian and de facto spokesman for one side, the Catholics.[3] His opponents were labelled Donatists after their leader, one Donatus. The points of division were deeply held: they concerned the church's response to persecution and specifically its attitude to those who were perceived to have betrayed their Christian faith. The Donatists wanted to exclude the lapsed from the church, fearing that such priests and those ordained by them would, as it were, contaminate the sacraments or render them ineffective. Catholics took a less strict line partly, one suspects, from pragmatic as much as compassionate reasons but partly because, as Augustine forcefully argued, it was not human priests but God who worked grace through the sacraments and God's grace could not be tainted by human fallibility. It was not that Augustine thought that there were no sinners in the church; rather, it was that he thought that it was through God's judgment and God's alone that the just would be separated from the unjust in the last days.

It was in this context that Augustine exhorted his Catholic audience to 'love peace and to pray to the Lord for peace'.[4] Part of Augustine's aim is to inspire them to a capacious understanding of peace: peace is not a divisible good, so that if I have more you have less; rather, peace expands with our generosity: 'the more people it is possessed by the more extensive it will be'.[5] But his advice on *how* his people should speak is intriguing: 'rather than provoking them and challenging them with harsh words, it's better for the time being to pacify them by just giving them factual information and even just keeping quiet'. If they insult you, the church or your priests, he advises, be patient and show 'persistent meekness': they have to be treated very, very gently. None of you, please, should engage in a dispute with them, none of you [should] wish even to defend your faith by hot argument, in case a spark should be lit by a dispute'.[6]

By contrast, one can find many other examples of bishops praising a very different kind of speech. John Chrysostom's homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, for example, repeatedly praise the first apostles for their boldness of speech, their *parrhesia* in Greek. The New Testament, followed by John Chrysostom, here uses a classical Greek term used for the open and frank speech which was bound to the truth. In fifth century BC Athens it signified the freedom of democratic discourse enjoyed by male citizens; by the Roman empire, however, it had come to mean the speaking of truth to a powerful superior. *Parrhesia* in the Roman Empire signalled a boldness of speech which bravely eschewed the silence or flattery that was born of fear. It was not peace-ful talk: it provoked anger, wonder, and dismay. In the early chapters of Acts, Peter and other disciples are described as using *parrhesia* as they sought to defend

[3] The term 'Catholic' (from the Greek katholikos, 'universal') was claimed by one collection of churches in North Africa to express their communion with churches across the Roman Empire. Not least due to Augustine's leadership, they won the argument against the Donatists. However, they were for a period a minority in North Africa, due to the popularity of the Donatists in North Africa. The Donatists, of course, held themselves to be the true and therefore 'Catholic' church. For a lucid summary of the debate, with primary sources from Augustine and others, see WILLIAM HARMLESS, ed. 'Controversies (II) Against the Donatists'. In Augustine in His Own Words (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 232–273.
[4] AUGUSTINE, Sermon 357.1 (tr. Hill).
[5] Sermon 357.1 (tr. Hill).
[6] Sermon 357.1–2, 4 (tr. Hill).

their belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and their commitment to his teachings (Acts 4.13, 29, 31). They provoke anger in the rulers in Jerusalem and wonder in the wider crowds.

One might argue, perhaps, that Peter and the others are not aiming at peace. Or maybe the Acts of the Apostles radically redefines peace. But I think another important dynamic is in play. In Augustine's sermon he is speaking from a position of power. The Christian imperial authorities had decisively opted to support the Catholics against the Donatists. Augustine was therefore asking his audience to be magnanimous from a position of some advantage (although not a completely secure position, given the Donatists' historic popularity in North Africa). In Acts, on the other hand, as Chrysostom clearly spotted, the disciples were speaking as a small minority, fearing for their lives. Their speech is remarkable. It is also in one sense powerful, because inspired by the Holy Spirit. But in human terms they are not speaking from a position of power. I wonder whether this is what makes the difference between these two very different, but equally lauded, modes of discourse. Does the language of peace look completely different from different sides of a power dynamic?

David Newheiser

In 2023 the Florida Legislature passed a bill, SB 266, regulating the state's public universities. The new law reduced faculty involvement in hiring decisions, eroded tenure protections, and restricted course content. In particular, it proscribed general education courses that 'distort significant historical events' or teach 'that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, and privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States'. An earlier law — titled 'Stop W.O.K.E.' ('Wrong to Our Kids and Employees') — has been blocked by the courts on the grounds that it restricts faculty speech based on its content. The new law is subject to a similar legal challenge, but - as I have found firsthand - its effect has already been chilling.

Several months ago, I took up a tenured position at Florida State University. My experience underlines the central point of your opening reflection: speech is inflected by relations of power. As you imply, Augustine's exhortation to love peace could seem like a general principle, a virtue to which everyone should aspire. However, you observe that Augustine is addressing people in positions of authority, whereas other Christians (like those John Chrysostom describes) lived as a persecuted minority. You suggest that this may explain why Augustine calls for peaceful speech while John Chrysostom praises *parrhesia*, frank speech that provokes anger and dismay. You begin by asking 'What kind of speech makes for peace?', but by the end it seems that conflict is sometimes required.

As we speak, Florida's state-level 'Department of Government Efficiency' is reviewing all available research written by staff, published or unpublished. In a letter to university presidents, the 'Department' indicated that it will also conduct site visits to ensure 'full compliance' with Florida law. According to Florida law, students are allowed to record their instructors without permission for use in a formal complaint. With layers of surveillance in place, merely raising a controversial question seems like a risk. To keep the peace, it is tempting to follow Augustine's advice - keep quiet and avoid disputation - but it seems important to say something honest and true.

Some theologians have argued that peaceful speech is the most suitable response to authoritarian politics. In response to Brexit and Donald Trump's first Presidency, Rowan Williams identified polarized conflict as a central problem facing the public life of Western societies, and he called for 'friendly curiosity' as the solution.[7] Williams explains, 'At the moment, we're in a political environment or public culture where…people get their energy from extreme polarization, and this naturally fosters an unjust attitude'.[8] In response, Williams argues that interpersonal generosity can overcome political divisions.

I think Williams is right that reflexive condemnation is morally and politically corrosive. However, when democracy is at risk, I suspect that civility is insufficient. In recent weeks the U.S. government has weaponized the levers of power to punish unions, universities, immigrants, and other perceived enemies. It has imprisoned people simply because they engaged in disfavored speech. It has arrested a mayor and a judge for apparently political reasons. Without due process and in defiance of the courts, it has deported people that have been convicted of no crime. In this context, it may be virtuous to address supporters of this regime with sympathy, seeking to understand why they see immigrants and academics as a threat. At the same time, when vulnerable people are suffering, resistance is also required.

As you describe it, the tension between peaceful speech and *parrhesia* seems to refuse any simple solution. This strikes me as instructive. In a book that began in earlier conversations with you, I argued that apophatic theology is a technique for inhabiting tension.[9] In my reading, its classic exemplars describe *apophasis* as a discipline that juxtaposes speech and unsaying. This tension serves to keep Christian discourse always in motion, proliferating in a provisional mode, sustained by an uncertain hope.

It is for this reason, I argued, that mystical theology can help us understand politics today.[10] Although the theologians I have in mind did not hold democratic commitments, I think they describe a tension that is essential to democratic politics. Theorists such as Chantal Mouffe and Bonnie Honig have argued that democracy is characterized by constant emergence, a process of contestation and experimentation that cannot be determined in advance.[11] In this context, negative theology models a politics that embraces paradox, enduring unreconciled tension through the discipline of hope.

Given my predilection for negative political theology, I see peaceful speech as a problem that cannot be solved. On the one hand, as you describe, Augustine argues that peace is not a zero-sum game: it expands as we share it. On the other hand, as I have sought to suggest, the demand for peace can undercut the work of political resistance. Perhaps we should conclude, following Augustine, that any peace that comes at the expense of the vulnerable is no peace

[7] Cf. MARY ZOURNAZI and ROWAN WILLIAMS, *Justice and Love: A Philosophical Dialogue*, 1st edition (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 100, 106.
[8] ZOURNAZI and WILLIAMS, 129.
[9] NEWHEISER, DAVID: Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[10] Vgl. NEWHEISER,DAVID: "Why the World Needs Negative Political Theology," *Modern Theology* 36, no. 1 (2020): 5–12, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12579 ; NEWHEISER, DAVID, "Desacralizing Political Theology: Dionysius the Areopagite and Giorgio Agamben," *Modern Theology* 36, no. 1 (January 2020): 76–89.
[11] MOUFFE, CHANTAL: *The Democratic Paradox* (London, New York: Verso, 2009); HONIG, BONNIE: *Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy*, Reprint edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

at all. On this reading, true peace is not a state that we can achieve, for it would require its own undoing through *parrhesia*, provoking conflict in the hope of genuine reconciliation.

Since I am living within this tension - here in Florida in the heart of the storm — I'm grateful for the chance to think with you. You begin by asking about peace and human discourse: I'd be interested to hear you say more about why this question arises. Is your interest simply descriptive, an attempt to understand peace as Augustine (for instance) presents it? Or does the comparison with Chrysostom suggest that you find some constructive potential in *parrhesia*, perhaps especially now? Do you share my sense that this is a tension we must endure, or is there a solution for the situation I've described?

Morwenna Ludlow

In your powerful reply, you have described what it is not just to discuss the tension between peaceful speech and disruptive *parrhesia* but to live in that place of tension. You also ask me why the question of peaceful speech arises for me. Is this a question of understanding my sources better or is there more at stake?

Certainly, this topic arises out of my current research, which asks how early Christian authors answered the question, 'What is good speech?' I have been struck how they praise certain modes of speech which nevertheless lie in tension with one another. One such mode is *parrhesia*: the bold speaking of truth to power. Bishops such as John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus and Ambrose see *parrhesia* as an essential part of the role of being a church leader. But it sits alongside other modes of speech which, in contrast with *parrhesia*'s disruptive force, are dedicate to 'building up'.[12] When Gregory of Nazianzus describes his vocation as priest in his second Oration, he focusses on good speech which encourages, consoles and delivers a certain amount of healthy challenge.[13] The peaceful speech which we have been discussing (Augustine's 'persistent meekness' or Williams' 'friendly curiosity') seems to be a variety of that speech which builds up.

There could be various ways of resolving the tension between the calling of the church leader to build up and their responsibility to be disruptive. One could simply say (as these writers sometimes do) that some situations and addressees call for one kind of speech and

[12] Cf, for example, 1 Cor. 14:3: 'But those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation' (ὁ δὲ προφητεύων ἀνθρώποις λαλεῖ οἰκοδομὴν καὶ παράκλησιν καὶ παραμυθίαν).
[13] GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS, Oration 2 ('Oration 2 in Defence of His Flight to Pontus, and His Return, after His Ordination to the Priesthood, with an Exposition of the Character of the Priestly Office'. In Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, translated by CHARLES GORDON BROWNE and JAMES EDWARD SWALLOW, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2:7 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1893). In my research I term this broad range of discourse which builds up paraklesis from the Greek parakaleo, which is used by Gregory and others to describe it. Parakaleo can variously mean to comfort, encourage, challenge, exhort, speak on behalf of/advocate for; the word parakletos (Paraklete, comforter, advocate) derives from this verb. See LIDDELL and SCOTT, Greek-English Lexikon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) col.1311; GERHARD KITTEL and GERHARD FRIEDRICH, eds., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, trans. GEOFFREY W. BROMILEY (Grand Rapids, Mich. ; London: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 774ff. Paraklēsis as comfort in e.g. Isaiah 51.3 (LXX); Ps. 22.4 (LXX); Matt. 5.4; as mutual encouragement or consolation in Rom. 1.12; as exhortation in Paul's epistles, e.g. 1 Cor. 1.10; 4.16; 1 Thess. 4.10; 5.14; Rom. 15:30; paraklesis as both exhortation and consolation in 2 Corinthians 1. Paraklēsis is said to be a characteristic of God (Rom. 15.5; Phil. 2.1), one of God's gifts to the body of Christ (Romans 12:8) and a gift of the Spirit or a consequence of those gifts (1 Cor. 14.3, 31).

some others for the other kind. In particular, as my first contribution suggested, I have been exploring the possibility that it was considered good to build up those over whom one had a pastoral responsibility (one's 'flock') and to speak disruptive truth to those who held power over oneself (those who pastor to the pastors). But ultimately, I do not think that human power dynamics are that simple. Those who are technically in positions of responsibility can find themselves on the back foot, even sometimes threatened, by those over whom they might be considered to have power. Leaders can yield power by seeking to please their (frequently-vacillating) followers, rather than acting on principles deeply held. A pressure group can wield verbal or physical violence while claiming to be a persecuted minority. Two groups within the same body can both simultaneously feel that they are the minority group which lacks power. Furthermore, the attempt to resolve the tension between building up and disrupting with the advice to speak to each person as appropriate underestimates the radically disruptive nature of *parrhesia*. The authors I am reading seem to suggest that their vocation is *fundamentally* bound up both with speech that builds up and with speech that disrupts, not least because they see this as a characteristic of divine discourse. This remains an uncomfortable tension.

I am attracted therefore by your idea that 'the tension between peaceful speech and *parrhesia* seems to refuse any simple solution'.[14] It seems to reflect what I find in my sources, not least because several of them reflect a stage in the development of the apophatic or negative theology which underlies your approach to this question. You have argued, for example, that Dionysius' idea of theological speech as a process of saying and unsaying is not 'an intellectual proviso to be noted and then forgotten. Instead, it is a discipline that must be continually renewed…'. In this way it can become a 'means of ethical transformation'.[15] Even though Dionysius is mostly discussing language about God and I have mostly been reflecting on language about and directed to one's neighbour, nevertheless I can see early Christian authors wrestling with the tension between saying/building up and unsaying/*parrhesia* as they interact, as priests, with those around them. Seeing this wrestling as 'a discipline that must be continually renewed' is helpful. Similarly, I recognise in them the idea that it is a practice sustained by eschatological hope (although I think that they would differ amongst themselves in how that hope is construed).

But I am not reading and writing in a vacuum. In particular, I am conscious that habits of speech formed in antiquity and early Christianity continue to have an impact on western societies today, whether conscious or unconscious.[16] For example, present-day debates about freedom of speech sometimes make recourse to the Greek concept of *parrhesia* which originally described open discussion in the assembly of fifth century BC Athens. But it is misleading to draw this concept of free speech into modern debates about 'freedom of speech' – partly because it implies that Athenian *parrhesia* was a right (rather than a practice limited to

[14] Cf. page 42 above.
[15] NEWHEISER, DAVID: 'Desacralizing Political Theology: Dionysius the Areopagite and Giorgio Agamben', *Modern Theology* 36, no. 1 (2020): 83, https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12506 .
[16] My argument here is an extension of that of MARY BEARD in *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books, 2018), extending it to include the influence of early Christian sources. Renaissance scholars did not read Cicero in isolation from Augustine.

male citizens) and partly because it sidelines the important later history of *parrhesia* in which *parrhesia* becomes a more constrained, but a more disruptive practice.[17]

More concretely, it seems to me that there are expectations of 'freedom of speech' which are illuminated by these different visions of *parrhesia*. Both in the USA and in the UK some people advocate a notion of free speech which seems essentially nostalgic: It yearns for a (perhaps mythical) time when people could express themselves freely and as equals, like the citizens of Athens.[18] This view of free speech looks back to Athens but usually forgets (or fails) to mention that Athenian *parrhesia* excluded, for example, enslaved and imprisoned people, women, children and those in prison. It seems to assume that a fundamental harmony – a common will, perhaps, or a basic peace – in such an Assembly secures the possibility of constructive, rather than destructive, disagreement. Another model of free speech allows for and even lauds abrasive disagreement. Its promoters advocate the tolerance of offensive speech and sometimes deliberately provoke offence as if that were a marker of truly free speech. But when others speak truth which disrupts their power, the advocates of radically free speech react with outrage. My research suggests that this is not just hypocrisy: a refusal to take the free speech medicine which one is happy to give out to others. Rather, it is a failure to understand the dynamics of free speech; it either limits the vision of free speech to the (mythical) Athenian democratic *parrhesia* or (despite protestations to the contrary) it misunderstands *parrhesia*'s other, disruptive side. If free speech is truly free, it cannot be limited to the confident exchange of views between equals where the friction of disagreement is eased by various social norms (such as belonging to the same social group, club, gender, class, or race). Rather, free speech must include *parrhesia*, which is *by its very nature* an unstable, disruptive and powerful mode of speech.[19] But this means that, at least on the face of it, there is something profoundly unpeaceful about *parrhesia*, even if *parrhesia* in a particular context is aimed at justice and at peace.

In my own immediate context, my thoughts on the language of peace have been focused by two particular questions. First, although our situation is far from that you have described in Florida, the question of speech on campus has come under scrutiny. The Office for Students has issued formal regulatory advice around securing freedom of speech on campuses.[20] It was

[17] For the argument that Athenian *parrhesia* was not a right but a practice see D. M. CARTER, 'Citizen Attribute, Negative Right: A Conceptual Difference between Ancient and Modern Ideas of Freedom of Speech', in *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, ed. INEKE SLUITER and RALPH ROSEN (Brill, 2004), 197–220, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047405689_010 and DAVID KONSTAN, 'The Two Faces of Parrhêsia: Free Speech and Self-Expression in Ancient Greece'. *Antichthon* (Adelaide, United Kingdom) 46 (2012): 1–13 (p.1: 'less a right than an expectation').

[18] See, e.g. PATRICK DENEEN, 'Democracy and Its Discontents', Notre Dame Magazine (University of Notre Dame), 1 October 2024, https://magazine.nd.edu/stories/democracy-and-its-discontents/ .

[19] This applied even in fifth century Athens: KONSTAN, 'Two Faces of Parrhêsia'. I have suggested elsewhere that Bishop Mariann Budde's sermon at the time of President Trump's inauguration could be seen as an example of *parrhesia*: MORWENNA LUDLOW, 'When a Bishop Called on Trump to "Have Mercy", She Was Following the Old Christian Tradition of Parrhesia', *The Conversation*, 17 February 2025, http://theconversation.com/when-a-bishop-called-on-trump-to-have-mercy-she-was-following-the-old-christian-tradition-of-parrhesia-248494 .

[20] *The Office for Students (OfS)* is the independent regulator of higher education in England: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/. The regulatory advice: Office for Students and ARIF AHMED. 'Regulatory Advice 24: Guidance Related to Freedom of Speech - Office for Students'. Office for Students, 17 April 2025 https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-advice-24-guidance-related-to-freedom-of-speech/ .

reported as recommending that students must come to university prepared to be 'shocked and offended'.[21] Implicitly, the advice seems to suggest that in recent years universities have been preserving what one might call a 'false peace', by seeking to prevent offence on campus. Are universities being accused, in effect, of outlawing *parrhesia*? And does that accusation have firm foundation? (I think it does not.) Is there an *expectation* that I should shock and offend, and how do I fit that with my strong sense that teaching should also be about 'building up': encouraging, comforting, challenging and yes, sometimes, peace-making? I find myself wondering too whether I, a senior academic, should come into the classroom prepared to be shocked and offended by my students? In sum, what would peace on campus look like? How does my speech contribute to that? Is there a space for shocking and offensive speech and what relation might that have to peace?

Secondly, I am not just an academic but a priest in the Church of England. As a representative in the church's national legislative body, the General Synod, I have witnessed at first hand the protracted, emotional and polarised debates over whether the church should affirm same-sex partnerships and marriages.[22] I have watched Christians on each side speak sharp words of challenge. I have watched others trying to create peace through their words. As the church currently works out whether structures could be created to allow spaces which could allow people to agree to disagree, I am faced with the prospect of a church which is divided not just in viewpoint, but in structures. I find myself wondering what peace in my church would look like and what members' speech might have to do with it.

Augustine suggests that the only true peace is heavenly peace: 'the best ordered and most harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God and of one another in God'.[23] In the meantime, 'the heavenly city is on pilgrimage' (*peregrinatio*).[24] Theologians have differed widely in their understanding of to what extent 'earthly peace' (which Augustine sees as order) is possible in the meantime. But Augustine's is a useful reminder, I think, that true peace is an eschatological reality lying ahead of us, rather than a state to which one is trying to return. Both on university campuses and in the church, the myth of a golden age is strong, whether that is the secular vision of civil society which is stable enough to sustain disagreement, or the idea of church which was once completely unified. I am still committed to speech which builds up – but only if it is directed to the future and not if it is focussed on the past. Perhaps

[21] JEFFREYS, BRANWEN, 'Be Ready to Be Shocked and Offended at University, Students Told'. BBC News, 19 June 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c74z8l8vkx3o.

[22] A couple married in a marriage service conducted in the Church of England are married according to both church and UK civil law. However, while UK civil law permits the marriage of same-sex couples, the law of the Church of England does not and it is not likely to permit it in the near future. The Church of England is currently debating provisions which fall short of permitting same-sex marriage. These are complex but boil down to: (1) should the Church permit services particularly dedicated to the blessing of those in a same-sex relationship? (A priest is currently already permitted to use prayers of blessing for those in a same-sex relationship, whether the couple are married or not in civil law, provided the prayers are used as part of a regularly-scheduled public service); (2) should the Church remove 'restrictions for clergy entering same-sex civil marriages'? See: https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith .

[23] AUGUSTINE, *City of God, Volume VI*, tr. WILLIAM CHASE GREENE, LOEB Classical Library 416 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), XIX.17: *ordinatissima scilicet et concordissima societas fruendi Deo et invicem in Deo*.

[24] AUGUSTINE, *City of God*, XIX.17.

part of the disruptive power of *parrhesia* is to destabilise the powerful myth of a peaceful past and to drive us on to a more just, and peaceful, future?

David Newheiser

I'm struck by the contrast you draw between nostalgia and eschatology. As you describe, some commentators claim that ancient texts offer the antidote to modern ills. On this view, the solution to contemporary conflicts is to recover classical virtue, returning to a time when people could speak freely without fear of causing offense. Like the gentle art of judo, you use the momentum of this argument against itself. In your reading, the theologians lionized by conservatives reject their conservatism; rather than seeking to reinstate the past, Augustine, et al. look to the future.

I think your focus on the future clarifies the significance of the past. In my experience, reading is an eschatological practice. When interpreted carefully, classic texts destabilize familiar assumptions, opening unexpected horizons.[25] This is a quality of your work I have always admired: although you are motivated by contemporary questions, your treatment of early Christian materials is invariably careful, with no hint of haste. In a manner that is characteristically measured, you undercut ideological appeals to the past while asking how the past can help us to see something new.

As you describe, people like Patrick Deneen imagine that ancient Athenians could express themselves freely, as equals. However, this harmony was premised upon the exclusion of women, children, and enslaved people. This is the sort of asymmetry that feminist theorists like Judith Butler have examined in detail. Butler observes that our societies assert a unity that denies persistent inequalities.[26] For this reason, much as Athenian *parrhesia* was often disruptive, Butler associates freedom with collective struggle for an egalitarian social order.[27] Although Butler is distant from the ancient world in many ways, they seem closer to this tradition than conservatives like Deneen.

Because Butler sees equality as incomplete, they echo the eschatological orientation you describe. Butler observes that nonviolent political movements are often accused of violence because they disrupt violent institutions. Although this claim is typically disingenuous – an attempt to discredit resistance by distorting its character – Butler acknowledges that nonviolence is not free from force and aggression. Since the pursuit of peace is often conflictual, Butler concludes that "nonviolence is not an absolute principle, but an open-ended struggle with violence and its countervailing forces."[28] Like Augustine, Butler sees peace as an aspiration for the future rather than a past achievement.

[25] I have elaborated this view in DAVID NEWHEISER, "Time and the Responsibilities of Reading: Revisiting Derrida and Dionysius," in *Reading the Church Fathers*, ed. MORWENNA LUDLOW AND SCOT DOUGLASS (T & T Clark, 2011); DAVID NEWHEISER, "Sexuality and Christian Tradition," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 43, no. 1 (2015): 122–45.

[26] JUDITH BUTLER, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, n.d.), 4–5. Butler writes about the classical tradition in a number of places, including JUDITH BUTLER, *Antigone's Claim* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

[27] BUTLER, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 9, 48, 69.

[28] JUDITH BUTLER, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (Verso Books, 2021), 56.

Where you refer to Augustine, I am guided by the tradition of apophatic or negative theology. According to its early exemplar, Dionysius the Areopagite, Christian thought requires self-critique to keep it in motion. This explains Dionysius's paradoxical claim that every name for God must both be affirmed and denied. In my reading, the tension between *apophasis* and *cataphasis*, unsaying and speech, is a practice of moral formation. Against the temptation to complacency and despair, Dionysian negative theology encourages Christians to inhabit a posture of hope, affirming their faith in a provisional mode without claiming an unsustainable certainty.[29] Although Butler holds different commitments, their pursuit of non-violence is similarly open-ended, animated by persistent desire rather than a defined ideal.

Since this affinity will seem incongruous to some, I think it exemplifies the connection between fidelity to the past and openness to the future.[30] As you suggest, some theorists claim to preserve a cherished heritage while projecting their own prejudices upon it. Theologically speaking, this gesture is idolatrous, investing the mores of a particular group with sacred authority. Rather than asking how the past can help us to see something new – beyond what we already believe – conservatism of this kind twists a rich and layered tradition into an avatar for modern ideology. In contrast, despite the distance that separates them, Dionysius and Butler ask us to imagine a better world by subjecting familiar assumptions to unstinting critique.[31]

Like *parrhesia*, critique is conflictual, seeking to unsettle the state of things.[32] Since this can be uncomfortable, some people respond with aversion while others complain that critique forecloses positive affect.[33] Your own approach is balanced, affirming the disruptive power of *parrhesia* while acknowledging the value of speech that builds up. I see Butler as saying something similar, albeit from the opposite direction. Where you suggest that constructive speech should be focused on the future rather than the past, Butler argues that investment in the future requires speech that is critical. On this view, affirmation, and critique are complementary rather than incompatible.[34]

In itself, this thumbnail negative political theology doesn't solve the challenges you and I have described, but it might clarify how to live with them. Since you have referred to conflict on university campuses and in the Anglican communion, I would be interested to know whether our conversation has clarified your thinking about what these situations require. For

[29] Cf. PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. COLM LUIBHÉID, with PAUL ROREM, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, 1987), 52–53 DN 592B; DAVID NEWHEISER, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 58–62.

[30] For me, Jacques Derrida and Origen Alexandria model this relationship more than anyone else. Cf. JACQUES DERRIDA, "Christianity and Secularization," trans. DAVID NEWHEISER, *Critical Inquiry* 47, no. 1 (2020): 138–48, https://doi.org/10.1086/711139 ; DAVID C. STEINMETZ, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (1980): 27–38.

[31] Cf. BUTLER, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 10–11.

[32] Cf. MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Fearless Speech* (Semiotext, 2001), 17–20.

[33] Cf. RITA FELSKI, *The Limits of Critique* (The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[34] I have argued elsewhere that this is the key insight of negative theology, as Dionysius describes it: apophatic unsaying encourages the proliferation of affirmation in an experimental mode, while (conversely) profuse affirmation defies synthesis in a conceptual system. For Dionysius, negativity is generative – however uncomfortable it might be, because it opens the possibility of unforeseen development. Cf. NEWHEISER, *Hope in a Secular Age*, chap. 2.

my part, I remain daunted by attacks on higher education, threats to academic freedom, and the rise of authoritarian populism in the United States. Nevertheless, here's a provisional hypothesis:

If critique and conciliatory speech both have their place, as I think we agree, then perhaps the best we can do is discern what is called for in each case, knowing that such judgments are always uncertain. Uncertainty is uncomfortable, especially when we face crises that demand an urgent response. Still, I think it is important to stay with the tension. It is sad to see cherished institutions crumble around us, but this fragility can be a spur to creativity. Precisely because things are uncertain, we can work for a new world, the just and peaceful future for which we hope.

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